



Air Command and Staff College elective offers insight into unique American, U.S. military behavior

3/26/2013 - **MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, Ala.** -- The classroom is filled with uniformed military personnel, like most classes here at the Air University. These students aren't wearing uniforms with U.S. flags on the sleeves, however. Their dress, and the varied accents heard in the classroom, reflects a cross-section of countries from around the world.

The 10 international students in class are part of the first-ever "Understanding and Working with the U.S. Military" course at Air University, and they are teaching as much as they are learning, according to course instructor Dr. Brian Selmeski.

The graduate-level seminar is part of the Air Command and Staff College's elective program, and it addresses the areas of potential misunderstanding that can affect other countries' ability to work effectively with the U.S. military. At the heart of the instruction is a deep commitment to the U.S. Department of Defense's focus on strengthening global partnerships, Selmeski said.



Dr. Brian Selmeski, Air Force Culture and Language Center chief of plans and policy, presents to a class of Air Command and Staff College international students March 13. Dr. Selmeski's course, "Understanding and Working with the U.S. Military," is the first graduate-level Air Command and Staff College elective to focus on the unique culture of the U.S. military. (Courtesy photo)

"The secretary of Defense said just last month, 'We can't dictate to the world, but we must engage in the world. We must lead with our allies.' In order to be successful in our missions, we have to work with others," he said. "The course is about building partnerships - one Airman at a time."

A select group of international students enrolled in the ACSC master's degree program competed to participate in this first iteration of the course. The course began with an overview of U.S. culture, and continued with discussions and readings on the cultures of the branches of the armed services, the U.S. military's perspective on gender, as well as relationships with civilian communities, among other topics covering 12 weeks of instruction.

Throughout the course, students are asked to consider the underlying beliefs that they and their American counterparts bring to their joint missions.

"Culture is like an iceberg," said Capt. Peter Hribersek, Slovenian aircraft maintenance officer and student in the class. "There is the top, visible layer that is easy to see. But if you want to understand, you have to go deeper. It's based on the values, beliefs, the systems ... The course has helped me for trying to stop judging others by my standards. It's not which culture is better than another one, but about understanding others."

Selmeski, who is also the chief of plans and policy for the Air Force Culture and Language Center, said that the course's topic has been overlooked in the past.

"For the past decade, the U.S. armed forces have undertaken significant efforts to teach service members about the cultural beliefs and practices of our adversaries, partners and non-combatants. Yet, there has been little emphasis on developing deep understanding on the culture of the U.S. military itself," he said. "Seeing ourselves as others see us is a lot harder than it sounds. International officers are perfectly positioned to help with this. They teach me something new every class."

According to Maj. William Racal, a helicopter pilot in the Philippines air force and a student in the course, different cultural perspectives can result in misunderstanding and inadvertent offense.

"I have seen it many times when working bilaterally or in social functions with U.S. forces in the Philippines," he said. "In the U.S., lower-ranking people are allowed to express their opinions to higher-ranking freely. I don't expect such freedom. Maybe this affects a negotiation, how discussions end up, and causes an offense."

Racal stressed the importance of two-way communication between militaries working together, saying, "In the

U.S., you're used to going other places. It is your practice. We should also work and not have a one-way process. This is better to accomplish the mission."

Selmeski plans to take the insights garnered from this initial class and use them to develop a guidebook on U.S. military culture that other countries can use to enhance partnership operations with the U.S. The guidebook will be similar to a series of guides the AFCLC has produced on other countries, and will be a durable, easily transported product that will give readers the essential information about working with the U.S. military.

Article courtesy of the Air Force Culture and Language Center